World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 738 recorded 10 February 1999

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Despite some remarkable achievements in the situation of children worldwide, the sad fact is that an estimated 12 million children under the age of five die, mostly of easily preventable causes; some 130 million children are not in primary school, the majority of them girls; and childhood is denied to an estimated 250 million child workers. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), discusses how to improve conditions for children around the world.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:00"
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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**. More progress has been made for the world's children over the past decade than in any other comparable period in human history. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been embraced by virtually all nations. Children are higher on public and political agendas than ever before, and yet many children continue to suffer. Only four years ago, UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, was working in some 15 countries gripped by civil conflict. Today, that number has risen to more than 55 nations where situations exist that profoundly threaten the welfare of children and women.

Our guest today is Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF. Joining me to talk with Ms. Bellamy is Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand* and Raghida Dergham of *Al-Hayat of London*.

Ms. Bellamy, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

In our introduction, we seem to be slightly contradictory. We say that more progress was being made for the world's children in the past decade yet you're dealing now with children and women with problems, acute problems, in 55 countries compared with 15 nearly a few years ago. So is it really – has so much progress really been made?

BELLAMY: Yes, it has. I think it's fair to say that enormous progress has been made particularly in the area of children's health. Reduction in infant mortality rates has been dramatic in the last decade, it didn't just begin. But as you point out, we're facing – we, not just UNICEF, the world is facing a number of very key challenges. One is the incredible amount of instability and violence in the world today and the second, which is also having a major impact in where we've seen reversal of gains at this point, is the impact of the pandemic of HIV/AIDS.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Convention on the Rights of the Child – tell us a bit about it. What does it involve?

BELLAMY: Well, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international

treaty – it's actually the most highly ratified international treaty. Only two nations have not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Unfortunately, one of them is my home country, the other is Somalia. It means 185 countries ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Afghanistan has?

BELLAMY: Yes, Afghanistan has. That being said it doesn't mean that every child is experiencing his or her rights. But it is more than just a document with some words on it. It's actually taking on a life of its own. Governments around the world are taking a look at their judicial system, their legal codes. They're looking at how they respond to children. It's really beginning to make a difference in the quality of life of children. There's a long way to go. Many children are still under terrible exploitation but it's having an impact.

LITTLEJOHNS: You can't speak for the United States although it's your home country, but what is the problem with the United States?

BELLAMY: It is a country that, historically, has been reluctant to approve international treaties and again, I am not giving you the official version. I can give you a version from UNICEF's perspective. It is only now considering the treaty dealing with equal rights for women, and this was something that was signed by President Carter in 1980. It suggests that a federalist system like the United States, where the states have power and the federal government has power, cannot be usurped by outsiders. My argument to that is, the United States will be breaking no new ground in ratifying this treaty. They can see what has happened in other countries. they can see that, in fact, that with children experiencing their rights – the right to health, the right to education – that in fact this improves conditions in these other countries. I hope some day that the Congress will take this up.

LITTLEJOHNS: I had an idea that it had something to do with young soldiers – teenage soldiers?

BELLAMY: Well there's an issue about the age at which young people can be taken into the armed services but actually the Convention, interestingly enough, still sets out an age that the United States can buy into and some other countries that oppose the higher age. UNICEF takes the position that children should not be recruited into the armed

services until they are of age 18 but that is not the accepted norm at this point. We would hope that it would be, but in fact the age of 15 is used in the Convention at this point.

LESSING: I meant to ask you a little bit about some of the work that's done. You do a great deal of work in the health area – malaria, yellow fever, HIV/AIDS you mentioned – but I wonder could I regard these, in a sense, as reacting to situations? How much does UNICEF look ahead to health situations that come out of either environmental disasters or gradually with things like climate change which does actually have health implications?

BELLAMY: Let me describe, first of all, what really has been the underlying factor of our work. In many ways, our work at this point is built on one of those UN meetings – the World Summit for Children in 1990. It was a meeting at which over 150 either heads of state or senior representatives of government came together, agreed on a plan of action. 27 specific actions – reducing maternal mortality, improving immunization rates around the world, dealing with iodine deficiency. Very concrete types of action quite focussed on preventive health care, not so much reactive health care. And so, in many ways, our work over the last few years has been working with governments and non-governmental organizations in countries trying to achieve these goals. Just as an example, the major contributor to mental retardation of children in the developing world is the lack of a little bit of iodine in the diet. The best way to get that iodine is through iodized salt. It's very understandable. It does not cost a whole lot of money. So that's where our focus has been now strengthened by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. You are talking about looking ahead and we are looking ahead at this point and we see our agenda evolving, not changing entirely, but evolving over the future because, for example, the kinds of natural disasters that we've always worked in, because we're in countries, are being magnified now by some of these climate changes and some of these environmental challenges. The floods in China were much worse because of the deforestation. So we then have to take this into account, as do other UN agencies, as we try and focus our efforts. It does not mean we are now going to become the environmental agency, but we have to take it into account when we are looking at the conditions for children.

LESSING: But things like, for example some children would be affected by air pollution and it could hurt their physical or their mental development. This could mean an entire generation in one area could be behind the curve as it were. Is this something that you are also looking towards?

BELLAMY: It is, but again the problem with being the lead UN agency dealing with children is you could be all over the place and one of the things that I've tried to encourage is that we really focus now. We are very country-based so our programme in Mali would be different than our programme in Morocco. It's not exactly the same programme. So we have to take these into account. Upper respiratory illness is a major killer and crippler of children and it's something that we focus on. But we also join with other UN agencies because they will bring more expertise in some areas and we'll bring it in another area.

DERGHAM: Ms. Bellamy, what is your priority in terms of challenges.? Is it the natural causes or is the conflict situation in which children are found?

BELLAMY: I would say there are three key obstacles to our work and indeed I would say this to anybody Involved in development. One is poverty. The fact is, even in a time of economic growth when we used to use the word globalization it would mean economic growth, now it would mean economic melt down. But even when that was occurring the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. So poverty and the disparities that poverty bring about – conflict, violence – and I am not only talking about wars, I mean increasing the amount of violence in the world today where women and children are often targets, is a second obstacle and certainly wars are a key part of that. And the thirds is the one I mentioned before, HIV/AIDS. There are now 20 countries in Africa – Sub-Saharan Africa – where the gains that I mentioned before for children are virtually being reversed. I'd say those are the three obstacles.

DERGHAM: Now at one point UNICEF had played a role in bringing awareness to the impact of sanctions. In Iraq, for example, I think UNICEF came up with the figure a few years ago – please correct me If I am wrong – that four to five thousand Iraqi children are dying a month and pointed out the impact of sanctions. You brought about quite a bit

of awareness. Has there been a follow-up to the awareness you brought in in terms of action?

BELLAMY: Our approach was look at the health status and the nutritional status of children in Iraq and clearly over the years in which sanctions have been in place their conditions have deteriorated. Our conclusion was not just there should never be sanctions, but that one should take into account the impact on the most vulnerable when one is considering sanctions. That happens on the other side of the house in the UN if you will but it is also not – it should not be used as an excuse for the government itself to also try and produce for its children. So there's no question that children's conditions have deteriorated during the period of sanctions in Iraq. We blame partly sanctions, partly the government.

DERGHAM: No but my point is that you did come up with this figure – four to five – is this still the figure by the way?

BELLAMY: Actually, conditions continue to deteriorate. I think we did a recent nutrition study, I don't recall what the figures are exactly, but conditions have not gotten any better.

DERGHAM: So consequently we are still talking about four to five thousand children dying per month? I just don't want to put words into your mouth in terms of figures, I just want to establish these are your figures.

BELLAMY: And I don't want to say figures that I don't remember are correct figures but what I want to say in .... what I want to be very honest about is that we clearly took a look at the condition of children, we identified the children were in worse condition, some children were dying. So there's no question that sanctions have had an impact. I don't want to use figures because figures get thrown around all the time.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you also blame the Iraqi government for this.

BELLAMY: I do. That's the point we make and that, again, it is both and both have an impact and sanctions should not be just blithely entered into but they should not be an excuse by the authorities to avoid their responsibilities as well.

DERGHAM: Where do you draw the line as UNICEF? After all, you are under

pressure politically by certain governments, many governments, all governments. How do you draw the line between the political constraints and the responsibilities you have to?

BELLAMY: We try to stay out of the politics I am not ....

DERGHAM: I know you're not .... You're not out of the politics. You did blame a government clearly and bluntly, so you're not staying out of politics.

BELLAMY: We don't blame, we challenge and we are also willing to work with governments because we're a UN agency in partnership. We start first with the child. The child is not the perpetrator of any kind of active attack on others and they should not be the ones that suffer the result of the actions of adults. So that's where we start. Let me again be clear. You can't exist in the world without being political but we have to exist without being large "P" political. We don't sit and just shake our finger and blame, we're there to try and assist. That's why we have a programme in Iraq.

DERGHAM: May I also take this one step further about the politics of it because UNICEF, some officials of UNICEF, maybe you personally, Ms. Bellamy, have been blamed, criticized, and I am not saying rightly so, I'm saying maybe you would want to defend yourself against these criticisms by people in Afghanistan, women's organizations. The Algerian government, for example, took issue with you on a position you have taken so that's where I am coming at in terms of how do you reconcile the politics and reaching the goal that you want to get across.

BELLAMY: Well, I think you look at each specific instance. In Afghanistan, UNICEF took a position. We took a position that said we were going to discontinue our work in education, not our work in health or in water, but our work in education because we found that our work and our financial resources were being used only to support an educational system that provided education for boys and not for girls. And we believe that was inappropriate. Girls and boys both have a right to education. We're not saying how that education system should function. It may function differently in Afghanistan than in South Africa but there should be a system in which both girls and boys can receive an education. So we discontinued our work there and we have said we will re-engage again in education if girls can get an education. In Algeria, we commented on the violence that

is taking place and the impact in the villages of the violence, whoever is perpetrating this violence on women and children, because they were largely the ones who were hurt the most. We will continue to point out where violence is occurring against women and children without pointing fingers at who is doing it. But there is a responsibility to not remain silent when this kind of violence exists in the world today.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF.

LESSING: Well I'd like to in a sense pick up one of the things that Raghida has mentioned. When you work in a country, let's take Sierra Leone, how do you in fact work in a country which has this internal conflict? I know the Sierra Leonean government says that it's a conflict which has external effect just as well, but there you are in this country which has enormous needs – child soldiers among other things – how does UNICEF function?

BELLAMY: I must say we're talking about all these countries in conflict or where there's either a very difficult environment because generally we work in partnership with the government. That's what we do. We go to our Board with programmes...these programmes have been agreed upon by the government, they are the goals of the government and it's how UNICEF can help. So that's generally how we work. I want to make this as a point. Well in Sierra Leone, although I'll point out right now that none of the UN agencies have their international professionals in because for security reasons they can't. But we have local staff who are working every day trying to help improve conditions for children. I visited Sierra Leone about six months ago. I met with government officials, I also met with some NGOs. We were doing a couple of things. We were trying to provide assistance in health care. We had immunization programmes going there where we could still reach – I mean because of security reasons you couldn't get to some areas but we still were sustaining some immunization programmes. Very important because the war is going on but meanwhile you could have children dying of measles too. Secondly, we had offered the government, and we made the same offer to the rebels, to try and assist in the demobilization of child soldiers and to get them into some kind of

education programme at this point. And in fact I challenged both the rebels and the government when I was there to stop using children as soldiers and let them come back and go back into the education system.

DERGHAM: There is an office -- you're aware of it also – it's also established by the Secretary-General that is supposed to be in charge of the situation of children in armed conflict headed by Ambassador Olara Otunnu. Now, that's supposed to be taken care of, or at least try to handle the issues you mentioned – demobilization, child soldiers, etc, you know, even rehabilitation. Is that a confrontational relationship or do you coordinate? Do they take politics, you do the humanitarian? How does this work?

BELLAMY: Actually we work together quite well. Remember that's the special representative on behalf of children in armed conflict. It comes out of the Graca Machel study which we actually served as the Secretariat. It's a very small office. It's actually not operational, on the ground. Mr. Olara is an extraordinary mobilizer and spokesperson for these issues and he really can be an advocate but in terms of the on-the-ground programmes and following up and what is going to happen if you begin to have young children demobilized, then you're going to have UNICEF and maybe some other programmes on the ground. They are not an operational agency, they are actually a small office where he basically the Special Representative.

DERGHAM: Why does he need 20 people to just represent an issue then? I mean, I don't get it. I thought they were involved in going to governments trying to deal with the political matters?

BELLAMY: Absolutely. In fact he had been to Sierra Leone then I visited Sierra Leone, but it was UNICEF and I believe also, in this case, with the Red Cross, we were the ones that actually had staff on the ground that could follow-up with the government and also with the rebels in a demobilization programme. They did not have any staff in Sierra Leone to follow-up on the programme and that's understood. I mean there was nothing wrong with that. That's exactly how it should work.

LESSING: But this does also bring up the point that the UN has a number of humanitarian agencies whether it's a disaster emergency situation or just things as normal

you have to work together. How do you pool this work together so there's not a great deal of overlapping?

BELLAMY: You generally try and do it by looking at where you have some expertise – some contrast. Let's take hurricane Mitch. The reason we were working on that is that we already have a programme in Honduras, we already have a programme in Nicaragua. When it hit, for example, UNICEF focussed on immediate needs for medicines, we focussed on immunization because you have a break out, we focussed on water because you can get cholera, which is a big problem. So those were the areas. World Food would focus on getting food stuffs to individuals. If it is a conflict, another agency you would have involved would be the High Commissioner for Refugees. They going to be working more closely with refugees. We, and World Food Programme, would probably be working more closely with the internally displaced. It's not as though you could put a stamp on everyone but there really are differences. Within the country you are going to have internally displaced, you are going to have refugees cutting across countries. So our focus would continue to be still generally on children and women.

LESSING: But is there an overlap?

BELLAMY: There is an overlap in the sense.... Sudan is an example. World Food would be basically – it's a huge air drop. There will be airdropping food, your basic food stuffs. Again, there are a lot of NGOs but we will be more involved with therapeutic feeding. in other words just getting the child healthy enough to be able to eat the regular food stuffs that will be dropped. Sometimes they will be so dehydrated and so malnourished that they're not even in a capability of having the food. So has there ever been an overlap? Yes. Will there be some in the future? There probably will. I think there's much less these days than ever before. We now have a number of UN instruments that really do bring the agencies much closer together.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Bellamy, the economic problems in Asia and Latin America have been very much in the news, what has been the impact on women and children of these crises?. Has it increased your problems in that area?

BELLAMY: Again, most of this is anecdotal at this point but we are starting to see

how – I'll use Indonesia as an example. We're starting to see a deteriorating trend in the area of school attendance. In other words, we're starting to see an increase in – a decrease, I'm sorry – in school attendance. And what we are seeing is that increasingly young people are not going to school and in fact, Indonesia had been doing quite well in getting its children to school and then, because the families need additional income, the children are going out to work.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about nutrition?

BELLAMY: We're also seeing some signs, these are early signs, but signs of a decrease and this is not all over Indonesia, this is in some of the poorer areas of Indonesia, we're seeing a decrease in nutritional status. Thailand and Korea – we don't have a programme in Korea at this point, but we do have in Thailand, seem to be doing a little better but countries around those are suffering a similar impact. In Latin America, the problem there has been significant increases, for example, both in health care and in education but what you're seeing in the poorest communities, largely in your indigenous communities, you're seeing the same kinds of signs. You're not seeing a similar improvement and in fact they're starting to see the trends going in the negative direction rather than the positive direction.

LITTLEJOHNS: Has there been a big increase in the number of street children?

BELLAMY: There actually has been a big increase in the number of street children around the world. One of the areas we're seeing particularly an increase of street children is in a number of the Commonwealth of Independent States – the former Soviet Union countries. There has been so much disruption in this period of trying to move from a central economy, much more focus on economic and political matters, and so the social sector systems are deteriorating – teachers are not being paid, children are starting to drop out of school and just a significant increase of street children.

LITTLEJOHNS: And there has developed trafficking of women, I understand. Are you involved in trying to curb that?

BELLAMY: Well, we are but, again, you only can do so many things and you have to focus your efforts. What we are seeing in light, again, of many of these economic

problems is an increase in trafficking largely because, particularly in girls, they become prostitutes because they see that they will make more money. It's a terrible commentary but it is one of the results of the economic downturn. And that is to be seen in everything from movement into Europe in some cases and, also in Asia, moving into some of the countries that are still more stable than the countries that are least stable.

DERGHAM: When a situation -- for example we're watching the news right now and it looks like there is a war between Eritrea and Ethiopia and there is conflict in Kosovo what should we imagine UNICEF doing? I mean it's clearly that children will be the victims because these are very serious conflicts. If I were to imagine what's UNICEF trying to do now or what did it do before when there were enough signs that there will be conflict what should I think? What are you doing?

BELLAMY: Some of the things that we're doing now are the very things we were doing before. I mean our programme doesn't turn upside down. And you've heard me use the word immunization or measles in a couple of cases because you have to keep some normalcy even in these abnormal circumstances or the kinds of things that would normally kill or cripple children will take over. So our work in basic health will continue to the extent we can. What happens in some of these conflicts is that you are, in essence, not able to have access to all parts of the country. But in Kosovo, for example, just to give you an example, we have, and working very much with NGOs, had travelling health clinics to try and bring some of the basic, very simple basic health needs for children. In Eritrea and Ethiopia, this is an interesting commentary right now because some of our programme that was going on continued to go on because the fighting is in the border. But what we are also seeing now is an increasing number of internally displaced people and so one of the things that we are trying to do some work – and this is not just UNICEF alone it's with the other UN agencies, there's actually the two UN teams are working quite closely together – is to try and deal now with the particular needs of this increasingly growing population of internally displaced people. But it's largely focused again on basic health and basic education.

DERGHAM: Your own deputy, Mr. Steven Lewis, a very able man himself just like you, Miss Bellamy, he is on a nine-person team I believe investigating whether there was a UN role in the genocide in Rwanda. First of all is there a conflict there and the reason I'm bringing this up is where do you know whether you are going to get involved in a situation such as genocide and is there something you could have done about it and you didn't? Both points.

BELLAMY: Both points. First of all, yes, Stephen Lewis, who is one of the two deputies at UNICEF, is an official member of the Rwanda Genocide Commission. That he is doing as an individual and not as an official UNICEF person. He was asked to participate and so he takes that time away from UNICEF. But I think, again, if we are ever to prevent these terrible circumstances happening in the world we have to look on how best we use our time. I don't have an answer how to avoid that . Again, I think one of the things is we have to break through the complacency of silence in the world today and we can't continue to just close our eyes to the kind of violence that exists, or we can't just only look at those countries that seem to be the healthiest countries. I mean I sometimes feel that Africa doesn't appear on anybody's agenda these days and yet there is so much difficulty in a number of the African countries. There's also some positive work that's going on and I think that has to be acknowledged as well.

LESSING: Is the emergency situation or the emergencies are they becoming the norm?

BELLAMY: Certainly instability is becoming the norm and by that we can't just say let's have a five-year programme and all will get well. But that can't be an excuse for making sure that we make a difference, that children are healthier, more children go to school, they get a quality education and they grow to be strong adults.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about funding, are you getting all the funds you need? I suppose that that's a silly question.

BELLAMY: Never get enough.

LITTLEJOHNS: You never get enough but I mean are you holding up pretty well?

BELLAMY: Funding is down for all development. The strong dollar is a killer. I used to want a strong dollar when I worked for the US government now when I work for the UN I only want it when I'm on vacation. But I will tell you what we have to do, we have to use the money that we get wisely.

LITTLEJOHNS: Miss Bellamy that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. Out guest has been Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF. She was interviewed by Judy Lessing of *Radio New Zealand* and Raghida Dergham of *Al-Hayat of London*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**